

One South Asia: Uncensored, Uncut Unity, diversity themes in first ever film festival

By Sian Wu, Examiner Contributor

“Bangla East Side,” appearing as part of the first Independent South Asian Film Festival in Seattle, turns out to be several movies rolled into one. The mosaic of Bangladeshi portraits is part documentary, part video diary, and all poignant social commentary, delving into topics ranging from urban crime, ethnic identity and civil liberties. The narrators of the film are a group of teenagers living and attending high school in New York City’s Lower East Side.

This mélange of different issues that constitute “Bangla East Side” can be found in each film appearing in the ISAFF, because no work leaves its culture behind in exploring a different side of South Asian film — away from the big budget, glamorous Bollywood films that dominate South Asian film. Because the 13 films appearing in the festival are independently produced, the topics of the films digress greatly from the formulaic musical love stories customary in Bollywood, the largest film industry in the world, located in Bombay, India. Topics from the state-sponsored genocide in Gujarat, India in 2002 (“Final Solution”) to the struggle to fight the invasion of Coca-Cola into a small Indian village (“Battle for Blue Gold”) are evidence of the amount of diverse and inspired intellectual talent coming out of South Asian film.

Farah Nousheen, the festival’s director, said she considered screening a Bollywood movie along with the other smaller, lesser-known movies. In the end, she decided she did not want to include one because she wanted to give a platform for South Asia’s minority filmmakers. As a result, there are several films representing the many languages of India, including Punjabi, Urdu, Telegu, Gujarati, Sinhalese, and English — a drastic departure from the Hindi-only Bollywood fare.

Controversial American films like Michael Moore’s “Fahrenheit 9/11” cannot begin to approach the impact of contentious films in India, which can incite protests, boycott, and even violent riots. Social messages are scrutinized under extremely strict standards by a censor board that can easily deem a movie too racy or controversial to reach an audience.

However, a censored movie can sometimes achieve more attention internationally and actually benefit from the censorship. “The censor board can sometimes act like free publicity,” said Nousheen. “But that doesn’t happen with all films. A lot of really good films don’t get shown, and that is really sad.”

One of the reasons why these independent movies are so controversial is the topics they

discuss. As ubiquitous as film is in South Asia, topics such as homosexuality, HIV, and mental illness are considered taboo, and thus not explored in mainstream films, which are for the most part pure, escapist entertainment. Many of the independent movies appearing in the Seattle festival are prime targets for the Censor Board of India, and would not likely be released to large audiences in Indian theaters. In fact, “Final Solution” has already been banned. Renowned documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan created an online petition to revoke the ban.

This year’s first ISAFF is produced by Tasveer, a nonprofit South Asian film organization founded in March 2002. Tasveer (or “picture” in Hindi/Urdu) is a collective of independent South Asian filmmakers that provides a support base for its members, mostly budding filmmakers. Members get together to discuss editing, scripts, and post-production, as well as organize screenings of new independent movies.

Nousheen said at first these screenings were fairly small and exclusive — a group of film aficionados from South Asian communities living in Seattle. But last year, with Tasveer’s first major public event at the Seattle Art Museum, the screening’s audience grew to include people from all different backgrounds — Bollywood fans who had never watched an independent movie before, and American foreign film buffs.

“We are very excited that our screenings are more racially and ethnically diverse,” Nousheen said. “We are also really excited about working with more people, in order to bring in diverse audiences, so that more bridges can be built between different communities who really should work together more.”

Nousheen worked hard to include a wide selection for the festival, making sure the films she chose were diverse in religion, ethnicity, language and gender. While she emphasizes the festival’s celebration of South Asia’s unique cultural differences, she also stresses the festival’s theme of unity.

“There are so many divisions right now, everything from Democrats and Republicans to Muslims and Hindus. To say that we are one is a very important political and social statement.”

The Independent South Asian Film Festival runs Sept. 17 - 20. The opening gala will be Sept. 16 at Consolidated Works. For a complete listing of all movies in the festival, check out the ISAFF website at isaff.tasveer.org.

Eclipse (Grahamam)

— **American Premiere!**

Directed by Mohan Krishna Indraganti, Andhra Pradesh, India, 2004

In Telegu with English subtitles, 96 minutes

Set deep in the heart of a village in South Central India, Grahamam is a haunting tale of a young boy struck down with a mysterious and life-threatening illness. The village shaman’s

superstitious diagnosis enrages the community with notions of betrayal and scandal, leaving the village broken in its wake. Mohan Indraganti's debut production is a shimmering portrayal of the dark, suspenseful, and controversial story "Doshagunam (The Disease)" by Chalam, known as the D.H. Lawrence of Telegu literature. Saturday, Sept. 18, 5 p.m.

The Final Solution

Directed by Rakesh Sharma, Gujarat, India, 2004

In Hindi/Gujarati with English subtitles, 98 minutes

This internationally acclaimed documentary is set in Gujarat, India between February 2002 and July 2003. The film examines the aftermath of the deadly violence that followed the burning of 58 Hindus on the Sabarmati Express train at Godhra on February 27, 2002. In "reaction" to that incident, some 2,500 Muslims were brutally murdered, hundreds of women raped, and more than 200,000 families driven from their homes. Saturday, Sept. 18, 7 p.m.

Note: "Final Solution" was banned by the Censor Board of India. Renowned documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan created an online petition to revoke the ban: www.petitiononline.com/FilmBan/petition.html

The Battle for Blue Gold

— **World Premiere,**

filmmaker will be present

Directed by Jaya Sumitra Ramesh, Kerala, India, 2004

In English and Tamil with English subtitles, 21 minutes

Set in the small village of Plachimada in the state of Kerala, near Tamil Nadu, this documentary is about the struggle of an indigenous community against the multi-national company Coca-Cola. The film only focuses on the voices of the women in the community as they are the ones viscerally connected to the daily retrieval and usage of water, and rarely use a political or media platform to speak out within a patriarchal structure. Monday, Sept. 20, 6 p.m.

Bangla Eastside

— **filmmaker will be present**

Directed by Fariba Alam and Sarita Khurana, New York/Bangladesh, 45 minutes

Bangla East Side documents four Bangladeshi teenagers growing up on the Lower East side of New York City as they negotiate the complications of their lives as young immigrant teens in post-Sept. 11 America. One minute they're giddily performing the latest Bollywood dance; the next, they're having a serious discussion about the Bill of Rights, the virtues of the educational system in America, and growing up as Muslims in Bangladesh versus New York City. A collection

of verité, collage, and home movies, Bangla East Side tells a different story of culture and possibility through young people's own voices and experiences.

Sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Washington. Sunday, Sept. 19, 1 p.m.

Summer in my Veins

Directed by Nish Saran, USA, 1999

In English, 41 minutes

A gay Indian filmmaker travels across America with his family visiting from India, as he struggles to come out to them. He was tested for HIV before he left for the trip and will not receive his results until they return. The filmmaker explores the dynamics of secrecy and love that mark this very close family. Pushing the limits of personal documentary every moment, every achingly intimate moment — including coming out to his mother — is caught on tape. Sunday, Sept. 19, 5 p.m.

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